

To Debbie, a TA who makes a huge difference,  
and a wonderful friend

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# CHAPTER

# 1



There's a photo of Gene Kelly, Debbie Reynolds and Jean Hagen from *Singin' in the Rain* on Nanna's mantelpiece above the gas fire, and it's been there for as long as I can remember. It's in a silver frame, placed next to the carriage clock; the clock that's always ten minutes fast so Nanna would never be late for anything.

*Ten whole free minutes, Willow. Think of what you can do with ten free minutes!*

It's not the famous photo from the movie poster: the one that doesn't even have Jean Hagen on it but has Donald O'Connor with Gene and Debbie, all three of them wearing rain macs and twirling big black umbrellas. In the rain.

*Singin' in the Rain* was in Nanna's top three musicals of all time. It was released in 1952 but the film was actually set in 1927, when movies stopped being silent and started having sound. Imagine that. Movies with no talking.

The other two in her top three were *An American in Paris*, which also starred Gene Kelly, and *High Society*, which didn't.

I have watched all three of them with her a zillion times.

"You can have this one day, Willow," she said

as we looked at the photo together, on more than one occasion.

I told her I didn't want it. Not because I didn't. But because I knew what me having it would mean, and I never, ever wanted that to happen. "You'll want it, I know," she'd say as she squeezed my hand. I always nodded. A little bit. Just so she knew I knew she was trying to say she loved me. But I always knew that. Nanna never made me doubt it. Not once.

Maybe that's why I spent more time here than at home. Even when I didn't have to.

Nanna had a thing about Gene Kelly. "Not as handsome as your grandfather," she always said. "But not far off."

I look at Gene now, as I hear Mum moving things around in the kitchen. Clatter, stack, bump. I wish she'd be a bit more gentle. It feels like we shouldn't be touching these things at all, let alone clumping them in boxes, and picking over things that are still covered in Nanna's fingerprints.

Evidence she'd existed.

In *Singin' in the Rain* there are two famous movie actor characters, Don Lockwood and Lina Lamont, who everyone thinks are a real couple

because they constantly play a real couple on screen, but they're not at all, even though Lina would like them to be. Don (played by Gene Kelly) and Lina (played by Jean Hagen) have always been in silent movies, but now there is sound and their new movie is going to be a musical and it turns out only Don has a nice voice, and Lina really hasn't.

Don's best friend, Cosmo (played by Donald O'Connor), is a great musician and convinces the studio to take on unknown actress Kathy Selden (played by Debbie Reynolds) to sing Lina's part from behind a curtain. Don and Kathy end up falling in love and starring in movies together, without her hiding behind a curtain.

I've always felt a bit sorry for Lina, who's laughed at a lot in the movie, and who can't really help that her voice doesn't sound right. But the bit where Don realises he's in love with Kathy has him singing in the rain about how happy he is.

It's really wonderful.

The movie's very funny and has great songs and dancing in it. The scene where Gene Kelly sings in the rain is an absolute classic. I'd love to have that feeling. *I'm happy again.*

I haven't got it in me to touch the frame, almost like if it stays right there, then Nanna will come up behind me and say, "Staring at our Gene again, are we, Willow?" and playfully tap me on the arm. I never minded being teased by Nanna. It was the gentle kind of teasing, the type that comes with love and affection, and knowing exactly what sort of thing you can joke about and make a person feel safe with, rather than the other kind. The trickster kind. The mean kind. The get-everyone-in-class-to-laugh-at-you kind. The kind I know more about than most people and which I still struggle to spot until it's too late, no matter how many times I've experienced it.

We played "Singin' in the Rain" at her funeral, at her request.

It actually hurts to think of it. Of that song. Her song. Playing there without her to sing along, to do her silly dance exactly the way she always had done. The words floating, and us sitting quietly, and the closing of the velvet curtains, just like at the old movies, and ... no more Nanna.

How can someone just be gone? One day making you hot chocolate and pulling the old ice-cream tub full of Kit-Kats and Fruit Pastilles

and Wispas out of the cupboard above the kettle, and the next, nothing?

I keep expecting to hear the sound of her slippers on the tiled hallway of her bungalow, for her to say, "Oh, it's all been a terrible mistake and I'm right here! Look, Willow! I'm here!"

But it's been two months now, and it hasn't happened yet. I haven't visited her grave yet either, even though the cemetery is just over the other side of the hedge at the end of her garden. Even though she used to say, "One day, when I'm gone, and somebody else rents this house, you'll still be able to visit my honeysuckle, just about. I'll only be over there." And she'd nod towards the cemetery. But. If I go there, that means she's really there, and not here, and I just ... can't.

I know Mum hasn't gone either. Both of us are waiting for something. I don't think either of us know what. So, instead, we sort through her stuff, and really that involves me staring at things and remembering, and sometimes stroking the bit of the sofa she used to sit on, and Mum filling up a box at a time, getting rid of things, just ... putting them in a box and then giving them away. I don't know how she can bring herself to do it.

As I think that, Mum wanders into the living room with a box full of kitchen things.

"I'm going to take these to the Age UK shop. Nice for Nanna's things to help someone. She won't be using them."

I'm agog. That is the only word for it. How can she talk about Nanna's things so ... dismissively?

"Can't we keep everything?" I say quietly. "Do we have to give anything away?" I spot the sieve Nanna used and reach out to take it from the box. But Mum pulls the box away, so the sieve, the box, and everything in it, is just out of reach.

"Willow," she says gently but firmly. "You know what I'm like with hoarding things as it is. I have too much of everything. You've had two months to pick the things that matter to you. You can have anything you like. But don't tell me a plastic sieve Nanna got free with a mixing bowl in 1998, long before you were born, holds a special meaning to you, because I doubt you even knew it existed before you saw it sticking out of this box."

I was going to say I did know it existed, actually, because Nanna used to let me sieve the flour when we made butterfly cakes, or fruit scones, or any of the other things we used to cook when

Dad left and she looked after me more than you ever did. But. I don't say that. I just go quiet. And I take the photo from *Singin' in the Rain* in its silver frame from the mantelpiece. I'm not going to risk her giving that away.

"There," says Mum as though something good has just happened. "I knew you could pick things if you tried."

I don't say anything to that either, so Mum says, "Right, we need to get you to school." And I follow behind her, and put the photo into my bag. "Don't be so hard on your mum," I can imagine Nanna saying. "She's been through a lot, and she's always worked, even jobs she's hated, to keep a roof over your head, and she really tries." It's not that I'm being hard on Mum. I know she really tries. But that doesn't mean she has to be hard on *me*.

When Mum closes the door behind us, I look back at Nanna's green front door. "I'm going to come here right up until someone else moves in," I say to her, as though she can hear me, and hoping Mum can't. "I'm going to water your honeysuckle, and make you cups of tea, and watch all the old movies on your VHS player."

Nanna never moved over to DVD, and certainly not streaming. I was going to show her how to stream movies one day, but time ran out.

"Off to school we go!" says Mum cheerily, again.

"Hooray," I say as flatly as I can, then quietly, "Miss you, Nanna."

There's a rustle of leaves in the pear tree in front of the house, a whisper in the morning breeze. I tell myself it's Nanna saying, "Miss you too, Willow," and I hug my arms around my middle, as though they are hers.